

## LGBTQ Pride Month: Honoring and Remembering Lives Lost to Violence

Sermon by Miguel Escobar

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Video: <https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/video/remembering-lgbtq-lives-lost-violence-sermon-miguel-angel-escobar>

Nigel Shelby. I have found it hard to get his picture out of my mind.

Perhaps you remember him. In late April, the news briefly noted the suicide of Nigel Shelby, age 15, from Huntsville, AL. They told the story of how he took his own life after being bullied in school, but it was the picture of a young black kid, making the peace sign, smiling a bit shyly in his white hoodie that has remained with me.

Nigel had already come out to his mother two years before, but it was this very openness, this vulnerability, that made him a target in the hallways and classrooms of Huntsville High School and the bullying was too much for him to bear. Cruelly, that bullying didn't end with his suicide. A local sheriff's deputy, Deputy Jeff Graves, went on social media and mocked this child's death and ridiculed the need for an LGBTQ movement in general.

This is one story among so many. Story after story, name after name. I know that when I first came across Nigel's story, I read it and scrolled on. But as it turns out, my mind and heart have not scrolled on and I find that he has stayed with me. And this is because Nigel's death bears witness to the stakes of what this month and this movement are about.

For this month of June holds many things: on the one hand, it contains a global celebration of how far the LGBTQ community has come in the 50 years since Stonewall, and yet it also contains the [third-year anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting](#). Happily, my wedding will take place at *the end* of this month, but distressingly, this month *began* with the discovery of a third transgender woman –

Chynal Lindsey – murdered and discarded in a lake in the city of Dallas, in my home state of Texas. That was just ten days ago. And seven days ago, [Ronald Trey Peters](#) of Atlanta, GA was murdered in what appears to be a hate crime. And the list goes on and on.

So we gather to remember. We gather to name. We gather to witness in the face of constant violence – both physical and religious – that these were children of God. As Psalm 139 says so movingly, let us remember that these were children whose inward parts were formed by God, who were knit together in their mothers' wombs.

Now, you might never guess from the hateful rhetoric of the Franklin Grahams of this world, but as a Christian – as someone seeking to follow Jesus – I know that our faith is hollow if it does not attend to the wellbeing of the least of these. From the story of God freeing captive slaves in Exodus to Jesus' Beatitudes we heard today, over and over again God urges the faithful to care for those on the very margins. And there is a good case to be made that whether we are talking about asylum seekers, or the homeless, or kids in the foster care

system – that the LGBTQ version of ‘the least of these’ is among the least, least of these, and that we are oftentimes teetering on the edge between life and death.

This past December, my colleague the Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas and I traveled to that open wound called the US-Mexico border. In the three months prior, President Trump had been inciting hatred against Central American immigrants and asylum seekers who were slowly making their way to the southern border. Many of us heard that story of the migrant caravan. Fewer know that among the first to arrive were the [LGBTQ outcasts of that migrant caravan](#), and this is what I mean by the least of the least of these. This group of 80 broke off because of discrimination from fellow migrants and locals wherever they went. They bore not only the exhaustion of that 2,800-mile journey and the literal scars of the violence they were fleeing, but also the rejection they met all along the way. And that is *before* they arrived at our border and into ICE custody.

Which brings me to two additional names: that of Johanna Medina Leon and Roxanna Hernandez Rodriguez. Roxanna was the first transgender woman to die in ICE custody and was a member of that breakaway group of 80 who arrived at our border last year. Johanna died just ten days ago in El Paso, TX. She was a 25-year-old transgender woman who, it appears, spent the last seven weeks of her life in ICE custody, pleading to get medical help. She was finally released from ICE to the El Paso medical system but died not long after, on June 1st.

Story after story, name after name. If the list is to ever stop growing then we must ask not simply *who* is killing LGBTQ persons but *what* is killing LGBTQ persons – indeed, *what* is forcing them to live on the knife edge between life and death itself. If we are to honestly answer that question, we must first look at ourselves as Church.

One of the most insidious campaigns taking place right now is a [nationwide push for ‘religious freedom legislation’](#) led by the President and Christian organizers of the National Prayer Breakfast. The intent is, in the name of religious freedom, to make it possible to discriminate against religious minorities and LGBTQ couples who want to become foster parents. Again, if you’ve ever read scripture, the mind reels / because over and over again we hear God saying that a basic tenet of this faith is to care for the orphan in our midst. And we *know* that it [is LGBTQ kids who are overrepresented in the foster care system](#), and we *know* that it’s those kids who are more likely to have to flee unaccepting foster parents, and we *know* that so many of these kids end up homeless and on our streets, right outside the doors of this beautiful sanctuary. We *know* this – and the people pushing ‘religious freedom’ legislation know this – and yet there’s something that they hate so deeply about religious minorities and LGBTQ people that they are willing to make foster kids’ lives even harder.

But it’s not just evangelicals and the organizers of the National Prayer Breakfast. Closer to home - the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby – recently spoke about how LGBTQ issues aren’t really that pressing of a concern in the wider Communion. In an [Episcopal News Service article dated April 27th of this year](#), he states, and I quote: “To be honest, in very large parts of the communion, it’s not an issue that registers very high,’ In those areas, people are

faced with 'issues of life or death' such as rising water levels in the South Pacific, expanding deserts in Africa, warfare and rape as a weapon of war in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Christian persecution."

It is telling that Archbishop Welby cannot bring himself to include LGBTQ people on that list of life and death issues. It's one of those statements that reveals who is and isn't in the room. It reveals who he does and doesn't meet in his travels abroad. It tells you whose stories are and aren't on his bookshelves. Had other voices been in the room, he would have known the names of murdered LGBTQ activists like Rene Martinez of Honduras, like Rabina Rabi of Nigeria, like Marielle Franco of Brazil. He would have known the stories, or at the least the widely available statistics, describing how life threatening it is to be an LGBTQ person trying to live and love and breathe freely in this communion of ours. Even here, in this part of the Communion, between 17 to 21 percent of hate crimes are motivated by anti-LGBTQ bias and there has been a year over year increase for the past three years. It *is* a life and death issue.

The reason I am saying this at a Memorial Service isn't to scare or depress anyone. Ben, my fiancé, has joked that I should only be allowed to preach on Good Friday, and there's probably some truth to that. But I am saying this because we need to stop the violence - and that includes religious violence. As people of faith have to get it deep into our bones just how close to the edge so many LGBTQ people are. So I want to end with one more story, a story of survival, that speaks to the stakes and urgency of what this is all about.

In his book *No Ashes in the Fire*, Darnell Moore recalls how he was [attacked at the age of 13](#) in Camden, NJ. Darnell's attackers were kids from the neighborhood who sensed that he was different. And so they beat him, and held him down, and poured gasoline all over his body - that very body Psalm 139 proclaims was intricately woven by God in the depths of the Earth. And then someone started lighting matches. They lit a match but then a gust of wind blew it out. They would light another match but a gust of wind blew it out too. They lit yet another match and again a gust of wind blew it out. Let's be clear: were it not for those holy gusts of wind, yet another LGBTQ child would have been burned alive that day, and we'd have yet another name to add to the long list of Nigels and Chynels and Marielles.

Christians are not supposed to be the gasoline in this story. Our political leaders should not be trying to light the match. We are called to be those holy gusts of wind snuffing out the fire of violence against LGBTQ people over and over again. *That* is the best way we can honor the people who are named and unnamed, known and unknown - the people who we ask God to remember tonight. Amen.